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ABSTRACT

Although first enunciated in 1827 by Samuel Newman, the modes of discourse--narration, description, exposition, and argument--were not very popular until formulated in 1866 and presented in the United States in a rhetoric textbook in 1885. After 1890, they were gradually accepted by the most influential rhetoricians of the day, and their use in textbooks as the major organization device did not change until around 1930. By 1950, three trends had undermined the hegemony of these modes in rhetoric and reduced them to vague composition legend: a return to the older "pragmatic literary types" classification of discourse, the rise of the concept of freshman composition as essentially expository writing, and the appearance of a new kind of textbook that substituted an autonomous central thesis for the modal concept. Today, the modal concepts still linger, but their essentially product-based character has made them less and less useful in writing classes. Replaced in theory by the classification schemes of writing researchers and in practice by other methods of exposition, this once powerful composition theory is now used in writing classes only by those teachers who are out of touch with current work in their field. (HTH)

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THE MODES OF DISCOURSE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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The classification of discourse into different types has been one of the continuing interests of rhetoricians since the classical period. Some of these classifications have been genuinely useful to teachers of discourse, but others have exemplified Butler's damning couplet, "all a rhetorician's rules/ Teach nothing but to name his tools." To explore the question of what makes a discourse classification useful or appealing to teachers, this essay will examine the rise, reign, and fall of the most influential classification scheme of the last hundred years: the "forms" or "modes" of discourse: Narration, Description, Exposition, and Argument. More students have been taught composition using the modes of discourse than any other classification system. The history of the modes is an instructive one; from the time of their popularization in American rhetoric textbooks during the late nineteenth century, through the absolute dominance they had in writing classrooms during the period 1895-1930, and into the 1950's when they were finally superseded by other systems, the modes of discourse both influenced and reflected many of the important changes our discipline has seen in the last century. Looking at the modes and their times may also help us answer the question of what sorts of discourse classifications are most useful for writing classes today.

The Early Years: Introduction, Conflict, and Acceptance

Most short histories of the modes of discourse (which for brevity's sake will hereafter be called simply "the modes") trace them back to

George Campbell's "four ends of speaking" and to Alexander Bain, the Scottish logician and educator whose 1866 textbook English Composition and Rhetoric made the modal formula widely known. But as Albert Kitzhaber points out, the terms we have come to call the modes were floating about in very general use during the period 1825-1870.¹ It is not easy to trace influences among rhetoric texts of this period, since the ideas were presumed to be in currency rather than the specific property of individuals, but the first definitive use of terms similar to our modal terms was in 1827. In that year, they appeared in a small book called A Practical System of Rhetoric, by one Samuel P. Newman, a professor at Bowdoin College in Maine.

According to the National Union Catalog, Newman's text was the most widely-used rhetoric written in America between 1820 and 1860, going through at least sixty "editions" or printings between its first publication and 1856--a huge number for that time. Newman owed much to Hugh Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Letters of 1773 and something to George Campbell's 1776 treatise on The Philosophy of Rhetoric, but A Practical System differed from both books in its yen for grouping of concepts, a fascination with categories which was to become one of the hallmarks of the rigidly formalized rhetoric of the late nineteenth century. Here is Newman's description of the "kinds of composition":

Writings are distinguished from each other as didactic, persuasive, argumentative, descriptive, and narrative. . . Didactic writing, as the name implies, is used in conveying instruction. . . when it is designed to influence the will, the composition becomes the persuasive kind . . . the various forms of argument, the statement of proofs, the assigning of causes. . . are addressed to the reasoning faculties of the mind. Narrative and descriptive writings relate past occurrences, and place before the mind for its contemplation, various objects and scenes.²

Newman uses the term "didactic" in place of the more common "expository" and, as was common in the later nineteenth century, separates persuasion of the will from argument to the logical faculties, but it seems obvious that his is the prototype of the modal formula.

Newman's terms did not, however, fall on very fertile soil. He had a few imitators between 1827 and 1866, most notably Richard Green Parker, whose 1844 text Aids to English Composition added "Pathetic" to Newman's list, and George Quackenbos, who listed Description, Narration, Argument, Exposition, and Speculation in his Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric of 1854. Few other texts picked up the terms, and the modes hung in suspension, waiting for a powerful voice to solidify and disseminate a formulation.

That voice was found in Bain. The author of English Composition and Rhetoric claimed sincerely in later years that the formula for the modes was original with him, and there is no direct evidence that Bain knew of the work of Newman or Quackenbos despite their tremendous American popularity (Newman even had had a London edition in 1837, a rarity for an American author), but original or not, Bain's 1866 formula was the version that "stuck." Here are "the various kinds of composition" from the first American edition of Bain:

Those that have for their object to inform the understanding, fall under three heads--Description, Narration, and Exposition. The means of influencing the will are given under one head, Persuasion. The employing of language to excite pleasurable Feelings is one of the chief characteristics of Poetry.³

Minus the reference to poetry (which Bain later admitted was extraneous), this was the modal formulation that was to prove such a powerful force in the teaching of writing in American colleges.

Why did Bain's formulation win wide adherence within two decades while Newman's earlier version was not generally accepted? There are two reasons, one having to do with the manner in which Bain used the modes in his text and the other related to the changing temperament of rhetorical education in America during the late nineteenth century.

First, unlike either Newman or Quackenbos, who merely mentioned their modal terms in passing in their texts--Newman spent only two pages on his "kinds of composition"--Bain used the modes as an organizing principle in English Composition and Rhetoric. Modal terms inform long sections of his discussion, and one cannot read the text without carrying away a vivid impression of their importance. This is an important key to Bain's success, for the modes were to become generally accepted not merely as a classification of discourse, but as a conceptualizing strategy for teaching composition.

The second reason for the popularity of the Bainian modes was the changing atmosphere of rhetorical education between 1830 and 1900, especially in the United States. At the beginning of this period, American colleges tended to be small and were often religiously-based. Curricula were generally classical, and rhetorical study tended to follow the examples set down by the great rhetoricians of the eighteenth century. The work of Hugh Blair was especially influential, and scores of editions of his Lectures were printed in the United States between 1790 and 1860. The analyses of belletristic literature that made Blair's work novel had a profound impact on other elements in rhetorical study during the early nineteenth century.

When we consider the popularity of Blair's belletristic approach to rhetoric, it is not strange to find that the leading discourse

classification of the time--the classification the modes were to displace--was based in belles-lettres and classified discourse "according its literary form--epistle, romance, treatise, dialog, history, etc."⁴ This schema, which I will call the "pragmatic" classification, was found in most pre-Civil War rhetorics. Although some texts included journalistic forms such as Reviews and Editorials and some went into minor forms such as Allegories and Parables, the five most common pragmatic forms were Letters, Treatises, Essays, Biographies, and Fiction.

Time-proven though this classification was, it lasted only thirty years after the introduction of the modes, largely because rhetorical study in America was transformed after 1860. As part of the general shift from smaller private colleges to larger institutions with more varied and scientific curricula, the study of rhetoric mutated from a traditional (that is, classically-derived) analysis of argument, eloquence, style, and taste into a much more formally-concerned discipline. The culture was calling for a new sort of educated man, and the "Freshman English Course" as we know it today, with its emphasis on error-free writing and the ability to follow directions, was born during this period in response to the call. The shift in classification schemes from pragmatic to modal is just a part--though an important part--of this larger change.

The teacher of the Gilded Age perceived his students as having needs quite different from the needs of their counterparts of 1830. Treatises, Biographies, Fiction, and such were well and good, but the essentially aristocratic educational tradition they represented was on the way out, and though I have called these forms "pragmatic" they were not necessarily practical, at least not in the sense that word carried during the post-Civil War era. What occurred between 1870 and 1895 was a genuine

paradigm shift, a shift from a concrete, form-based model that had traditionally been used to exhibit the sorts of literature in which gentlefolk were supposed to be interested to a more pliable abstract model that could be adapted to anything which a rising young American was supposed to wish to say.

We can see the conflict between these two classifications clearly in the textbooks of the period, and the National Union Catalog, that great American card-file, tells the story of the decline of the pragmatic classification fairly clearly. Piecing together information about the number of years texts were in print and numbers of copies available in NUC member libraries, we can see, as we might expect, that pragmatically-based textbooks were easily the most common sort until 1875, at which point they began to lose ground to modal or partially-modal texts. The most popular of the post-war pragmatic rhetorics, John S. Hart's Manual of Composition and Rhetoric, has a telling publication history. It was published in 1870, before Bain's text had really begun to gain wide popularity, and seems to have been in great demand through the early seventies. Hart's book fell off badly around 1880, though, and copies are very scarce after 1885, though the book continued to be published until 1892. Pragmatic texts foundered and died after the middle eighties, and the last such text I can find was published in 1888 (and lasted only until 1889).

While the pragmatic classification was waning, the modes were waxing, but only after a slow beginning. The period 1875-1890 shows no clear victor, though modal texts can be seen advancing, and general acceptance of the modes took two decades after Bain's first publication of them. English Composition and Rhetoric itself, after a burst of popularity in 1867,

subsided into relative obscurity through the 1870's and early 1880's, and Bain's early followers were not much luckier.

The turning point, the text that really marks the paradigm shift most clearly, did not come until 1885, with the publication of The Practical Elements of Rhetoric, by the redoubtable John Genung. As much as Bain himself (whose sales Genung helped boost throughout the late eighties), Genung popularized the modes throughout America. The Practical Elements was in print from 1885 through 1904, and only Bain's text, which was in print far longer, A. S. Hill's Principles of Rhetoric, which had the cachet of Harvard, and Barrett Wendell's English Composition were more popular during the period 1865-1900. Between them, Bain and Genung greatly influenced the theoretical and practical world of rhetoric instruction between 1886 and 1891, and the popularity of their books sounded the death-knell of the pragmatic classification.

Genung, of course, did not adopt Bain's notion of four modes absolutely, as had Bain's earlier and less successful imitators A. D. Hepburn and David Hill. He distinguished between Argumentation, which he called "Invention dealing with Truths" and Persuasion, which he called "Invention dealing with Practical Issues."⁵ These two sorts of arguments were copied and used by derivative textbook authors after Genung until about 1910, when the four standard terms swept all before them. Genung himself adopted the four terms of the standard modes himself in 1893 in his Outlines of Rhetoric, the follow-up text to The Practical Elements.

The Reign of the Modes

Of the textbook authors that Kitzhaber calls "The Big Four" of the late nineteenth century--Barrett Wendell, John Genung, Adams Sherman Hill, and Fred Newton Scott (who wrote his texts in collaboration with Joseph V.

Denney)--all had implicitly accepted the modes by 1894, and by 1895 all except Wendell were using them as important parts of their texts. Wendell merely mentioned the modes as an accepted convention in his English Composition, using instead as an organizing structure his famous trinity of Unity-Mass-Coherence (which he adopted, incidently, from Bain's discussion of the paragraph). Though he did not use the modes in an important way, Wendell at least advanced no competitive classification, and many later texts adopted both the modes and the trinity as important elements.⁶

A. S. Hill, Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard, denied the modes throughout the eighties in his text The Principles of Rhetoric, which omitted Exposition from its scope. Hill saw the handwriting on the wall in the early nineties, however, when sales of his book dropped off sharply. There was no edition of The Principles of Rhetoric in 1894, and when the book reappeared in 1895 in a "New Edition, Revised and Enlarged," the revision recited the modal litany in perfect chorus. So fell into line many of the partially-converted.

Fred N. Scott and Joseph Denney's text Paragraph-Writing in 1891 dealt as much with paragraphs as with whole essays--using, of course, the paragraph model that Bain had originated 25 years earlier--but the four sorts of essays that Scott and Denney do mention are the familiar quartet. Paragraph-Writing was Scott and Denney's most popular text, and aside from its use of the modes it is important for another reason. It is the first truly popular codification of "the means of developing paragraphs" which were to become more and more important in the fifty years following Scott and Denney. Adopted from the classical topics, these "means" included Contrast, Explanation, Definition, Illustration, Detail, and Proofs. Watch these terms, for they will reappear, both as methods of paragraph

development and more importantly as the "methods of exposition" that will come to supplant the modes.

This would not happen, though, for many years. After 1895, the modes were the controlling classification, having driven the pragmatic texts from the field. During the late nineties, non-modal texts almost completely disappeared; of 28 books dating between 1893 and 1906 surveyed by Kitzhaber only four made no mention of the modes.⁷ There was for a while some disagreement about whether argument and persuasion were truly separate, but by 1910 even these internecine quarrels had died out. That the modes were accepted almost absolutely was evidenced by the growth and spread of texts devoted to treating of only one of them, such as George Pierce Baker's influential The Principles of Argumentation in 1895, Carroll L. Maxcy's The Rhetorical Principles of Narration in 1911, and Gertrude Buck's Expository Writing in 1899. As we shall see, these single-mode texts would have an important effect on the future of the modes as a system.

With single-mode and full mode textbooks controlling the lists, the reign of modal text organization was long and ponderous, an Eisenhower Era of composition that lasted from the mid-1890's through the mid-1930's. During this time there were no theoretical advances. Most textbooks were written by followers of Genung and Wendell, and a typical organizing structure of the time was a combination of Wendell's Unity-Mass-Coherence trinity--later modernized to Unity-Coherence-Emphasis--with "the four traditional forms of discourse." (By 1920 the origin of the modes was lost in the mists of time; they had presumably been carved in stone during the Paleolithic Age.) In terms of new insights the teaching of composition was frozen in its tracks between 1900 and 1925, and despite a few novel treatments and up-to-date appearances, I cannot find a single text that is not derivative of the authors of the nineties.

Partially this stasis was due to the changing nature of textbook authors, which in turn is the result of new directions in the discipline of English. During this period "philology" was coming more and more to mean the criticism and scholarly study of literature, and rhetoric was being displaced in many schools from English departments. The composition texts of the nineteenth century had generally been written by rhetorical scholars (Barrett Wendell is a notable exception), but in the early years of the new century, the majority of composition texts begin to be written by literary scholars who were producing derivative texts in order to put bread on their tables. The pure fire of Bain was kept alive during this period by such literary figures as Percy Boynton, John C. French, and Raymond Pence. Happily, this practice of literary scholars writing conventional composition texts merely to make a buck has almost completely died out in our time.

From the middle of the last decade of the nineteenth century, through the Great War, and into the middle of that disillusioned decade following it, the modes controlled the teaching of composition through complete control of textbooks. Nothing threatened, nothing changed. But the world was turning, and the modes were about to be challenged.

The Modes Under Attack

It is relatively simple to detail modal hegemony up until the mid-twenties, but at that time, in composition as in the culture at large, great shifts began to occur. Not all of these can be satisfactorily analyzed, but beginning in the late twenties we can note the rise of three trends that would fragment the discipline and result in the gradual diminution of the importance of the modes. The first was the rebirth of

the ancient rival of modal organization, the pragmatic classification system. The second--which was, ironically, a by-product of the vast popularity the modes had had--was the rise of single-mode textbooks, especially those dealing with exposition. The third was the appearance of new sort of textbook which I call the "thesis text." Let us examine these three trends one by one.

To begin with, there is no doubt that the pragmatic classification began a comeback, especially after 1929. An early sign of its resurgence was the publication in 1926 of a book called Better Writing, by Henry Seidel Canby. This same Canby had in 1913 published a completely canonical modal textbook, but later went on to become editor of the Saturday Review of Literature, and when he returned to the textbook fray it was with a more jaundiced and practical viewpoint. Better Writing, which completely ignored the modes, concentrated instead on what Canby called "Specialties--the various kinds of literary composition." They are The Essay, The Novel, The Article, The Short Story, Drama, Poetry, and Criticism.⁸ Does the list sound familiar?

Better Writing, which aimed at an audience of potentially professional writers, was immensely popular between 1926 and 1928, and it helped to re-create the market for pragmatic texts. This twentieth-century pragmatic angle, though, was a far cry from the genteel belletristic pragmatism of the nineteenth century. The Depression guaranteed that the "practical" pragmatism so evident in Canby would spread as people realized that a knowledge of conventional forms might be the basis of a marketable skill of some sort, whether as a fiction writer or as a clerk in an office. The new pragmatic texts of the thirties were either business-oriented, like Johnson and Macgregor's English Expression, which deals with letters, place

descriptions, occupational reports, applications, etc., or more general, like Ettie Lee's English for Today, which covers description, precis-writing, social-letter writing, and explanation. Egged on by education theorists (usually of a Deweyite "education for democracy" persuasion, a breed which sprang up in great numbers during the twenties and thirties), textbook authors began to change their wares, aiming to produce students who were "not walking encyclopedias, but well-rounded personalities equipped with all the skill and knowledge they will need in life."⁹ Again, cultural demands on colleges were changing as college populations changed, and textbooks were responding to the pressure.

The thirties also saw another important pragmatic trend: the rising popularity of technical-and business-writing courses and their gradual separation from the general Freshman English curriculum. These form-based courses expanded tremendously during this period and were usually forced into a separate division by old-line composition and literature teachers, who distrusted as mechanistic the pragmatic "technical forms" approach of most of these courses. This distrust still exists today for the same reasons, and anyone who has ever attended a faculty meeting that debated the adoption of a new business-writing course has seen firsthand the forces that elevated the abstract, "theory-based" modes to power.

The revival of the pragmatic classification took some students away from traditional modal courses, but far more important to the decline of the modes was the rapid growth of the popularity of single-mode texts. These texts had been popular as far back as the nineties, as we have seen, but in the twenties and thirties the argumentation and narration texts were far outstripped by the ultimate victor: texts concerned with exposition. Books like Maurice Garland Fulton's Expository Writing, which was first

published in 1912 and which survived until 1953 (making it, by my calculations, the longest-lived text of the century) found new popularity in the thirties, and dozens of new expository-writing texts appeared after 1940.

Fulton's text, the Greatfather to most which followed it, was organized by what he called "Expository Procedures and Devices." Among them are the following: Definition, Classification and Division, Contrast, Comparison or Analogy, Examples, and Descriptive Exposition. You will notice that these overlap to a large degree with Scott and Denney's 1891 list of "Methods of Paragraph Development." Fulton's Procedures and Devices were to be the first important prototypes for the "methods of exposition" still being retailed (sometimes under different names) in many texts today.

Fulton's list was followed and augmented by many other writers throughout the twenties and thirties. There were disagreements about what the "genuine" methods of exposition were, with different texts offering different choices. By the late thirties, though, the list had largely standardized itself, and exposition as it existed in a whole series of widely-used texts from the forties through the present time consisted of selections from this final list: definition, analysis, partition, interpretation, reportage, evaluation by standards, comparison, contrast, classification, process analysis, device analysis, cause-and-effect, induction, deduction, examples, and illustration.¹⁰

By the 1940's exposition had become so popular that it was more widely taught than the "general" modal freshman composition course. This does not, of course, mean that the other modes ceased to exist, but more and more they retreated out of composition classes into specialized niches of

their own. Narration and description seceded to become the nuclei of creative writing courses, and argumentation, finding itself more and more an orphan in English departments, took refuge in Speech departments and became largely an oral concern for many years. The very success of the modes--and the fact that exposition was the most "practical" of them in a business-oriented culture--was destroying their power as a general organizational strategy throughout the thirties and forties. The modes were still used in many texts, but by the end of World War II they no longer controlled composition or defined discourse except in a relatively general way.

The third trend that was to result in the passing of the modes was the rise of a new sort of composition textbook, different in its angle of approach from modal texts. Prior to 1930, nearly all composition texts were organized using an impartial hierarchy of importance--modal organization, the Bain-Wendell trinity of Unity-Coherence-Emphasis, the Bainian paragraph model, traditional three-element sentence theory, and a few other ritual treatments. The order of presentation of material in texts was arbitrary, and occasionally the trinity and the modes would change positions in the hierarchy, but the most important classification in the texts was always modal, and the controlling idea about writing behind these texts was modal as well. Up until the thirties there were few departures from this line.

Then, beginning in 1930 and in larger numbers throughout the forties and fifties, we begin to see this new type of textbook. It is not a text in purely expository writing; it does not use pragmatic classification exclusively; and it is certainly not a text along traditional impartial-selection/modal lines. This new kind of text does, of course, contain a

great deal of traditional rhetorical material, but it is marked by an important change in focus: it announces that one powerful "master idea" about writing should control the way that students learn to write, and it gives precedence to this central thesis, subordinating all other theoretical material to it. For this reason, I call these new textbooks thesis texts. They are the modern composition texts, and today they control the textbook world almost completely.

It would not be hard to make a case for Barrett Wendell's English Composition in 1891 as the first thesis text. In that book Wendell observed that rhetoric texts in his time consisted

. . . chiefly of directions as to how one who would write should set about composing. Many of these directions are extremely sensible, many very suggestive. But in every case these directions are appallingly numerous. It took me some years to discern that all which have so far come to my notice could be grouped under one of three simple heads. . . The first of these principles may conveniently be named the principle of Unity; the second, the principle of Mass, the third, the principle of Coherence.¹¹

There in a nutshell is the nature of the thesis text: "All else is essentially subordinate to this." Wendell spent the rest of his book explicating how his three principles could be applied to sentences, paragraphs, and whole themes.

Despite the success of English Composition and the flock of slavish imitators it spawned, Wendell did not have a spiritual successor for over forty years; the period following his text, as we have seen, was marked by conventionality and reliance upon modal organization. In 1931, though, a text appeared which was to signal an important departure: Norman Foerster and J. M. Steadman's Writing and Thinking. This extremely popular text was in print for over twenty years, and it exerted a profound influence on later authors. Foerster and Steadman's dual thesis was announced on their

first page: "Writing and thinking are organically related," and "Writing, in other words, should be organic, not mechanic."¹² The authors then went on to subordinate the rest of their material--not much of which was genuinely original--to this thesis.

Although Writing and Thinking was a popular book, the new trend in texts began slowly; there are only a few books identifiable as being controlled by non-modal theses in the thirties and early forties-- books like Howard Seely's Experience in Thought and Expression and Easley Jones' Practical English Composition. After World War II, though, another change swept through college teaching as veterans flocked to school under the GI Bill. In English, thesis texts rode this change and began to quickly grow in popularity; novelty for the sake of novelty began for the first time in many years to be an important intellectual force.

The theses that truly established thesis texts, that tipped the balance away from the domination of the modes in the late forties, were concerned with the two most popular intellectual movements in composition theory at that time: the general education movement, with its "language arts/communications" approach, and the General Semantics movement. This essay is not the place for a history of these movements, fascinating as one might be. In brief, the "communications" movement grew out of the Deweyite "English for Life Skills" movement of the thirties and emphasized the whole continuum of language activities-- reading, writing, speaking, and listening--rather than writing alone. The Conference on College Composition and Communication was formed in 1948 by "communications" enthusiasts. (That's where the "communication" comes from.) General Semantics, of course, was based on the work of Alfred Korzybski as popularized by S. I. Hayakawa in his influential Words in Action of 1940, and is most interested

in language as a symbol-system liable to abuse. The most famous General Semantics catch-phrase is "The map is not the territory," but GS consisted of far more--indexing numbers, the "abstraction ladder," etc. Together, communications and General Semantics provided theses for more than half of the new composition texts that appeared between 1948 and 1952. There were, of course, some thesis texts not based on either communications or on GS, such as Eric Steel's Readable Writing and Donald Davidson's American Composition and Rhetoric. One of the best of them is still going strong: James McCrimmon's Writing With A Purpose, the thesis of which is, of course, the importance of the writer's controlling purpose. Most thesis texts not based on communications or General Semantics used theses based on some version of old favorites: writing and thinking, writing and reading, the unique demands of American writing. Later these theses would grow more complex and interesting: writing and perception, writing and cognition, writing and process. Most expository writing texts also took on characteristics of thesis texts during the fifties, and more and more thesis texts came to use the "methods of exposition" as the decade wore on.

Fall and Exile of the Modes

And where stood the Bainian modes in this avalanche--for an avalanche it became after 1950--of pragmatists, expositionists, and thesis texts? As has been suggested, the modes did not completely disappear, but they were certainly changed, truncated, and diminished in power. The new texts that appeared did not subvert the modes because they proved them theoretically erroneous, but rather because their theses or methods took over the place of central organizational construct that the modes had come to occupy.

McCrimmon makes a telling statement in the Preface to the first edition of Writing With A Purpose in 1950: "The decision to make purpose the theme of the book made the conventional fourfold classification of writing unnecessary. Therefore Exposition, Narration, Description, and Argument are not considered as special types of writing."¹³ Even when thesis texts mentioned the modes it was a minor consideration. Essentially, the modes were ignored to death after 1950. Rather than being executed after the revolution they were exiled to the hinterlands, where they pined away.

The new thesis texts used a number of novel classifications of discourse--Robert Hamilton Moore's Natural, Logical, and Psychological classes in his Effective Writing, McCrimmon's Spatial, Chronological, and Analytical discourse types in Writing With A Purpose, Bradford and Moritz's mixed classification in The Communication of Ideas. The modes were everywhere being replaced by novel classification forms, shoved aside in favor of the new. After 1955 or so they are seen in new texts only when those texts have specifically traditional intent: for instance, Richard Weaver's Composition and Hughes and Duhamel's Rhetoric: Principles and Usage. Though the theses of the thesis texts would continue to change--from General Semantics and communications in the forties and fifties to transformational grammar, problem solving, and prewriting in the sixties to invention, process, cognition, and syntactic methods in the seventies--all these theses have one thing in common: they bypass or ignore the modes of discourse. W. Ross Winterowd spoke for thesis-text authors when he stated in a 1965 text book that the modal classification, "though interesting, isn't awfully helpful."¹⁴

In rhetoric texts today, the modes are still expiring like Clarissa in a drawn-out educational death-scene. A few texts still mention them as minor elements, but their power in rhetorics is gone. Though the modes

still retain a shadow of their old puissance as an organizing device in certain freshman anthologies of essays, their importance in modern pedagogy is constantly diminishing, and the only teachers still making real classroom use of the modes are those out of touch with current theory. Most teachers can name the modes of discourse if asked, but most would draw a blank if queried on where they learned about the modes or on how the modes help students learn to write. Stripped of their theoretical validity and much of their practical usefulness, the modes cling to a shadowy half-life in the attic of composition legends. Sic semper tyrannis.

L'envoi -- The Modes as Plausible Fiction

Why did the modes of discourse rise to such power, hold it for so long and so absolutely, and then fail so completely? We may never know for certain, but at least part of the answer has to do with the relative vitality of the rhetorical tradition during the period 1870-1930, an era when hardly any progressive theoretical work was done in the field. Alexander Bain, Fred N. Scott, and perhaps Barrett Wendell are the greatest figures writing during the period, and (except for Scott, whose influence was limited) they cannot stand beside Campbell in the eighteenth century or Burke in the twentieth. The modes became popular and stayed popular because they fit into the abstract, mechanical nature of writing instruction at the time, and they diminished in importance as other more vital ideas about writing appeared in the 1930's and after. Like the "dramatic unities" that ruled the drama of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until exploded by Samuel Johnson's common sense, the modes were only powerful so long as they were not examined for evidence of their usefulness.

One of the most damning assessments of the modes' use in the nineteenth century is that of Albert Kitzhaber:

Such convenient abstractions as . . . the forms of discourse were ideally suited to the purpose of instruction in a subject that had been cut off from all relation with other subjects in the curriculum and, in a sense, from life itself . . . They represent an unrealistic view of the writing process, a view that assumes writing is done by formula and in a social vacuum. They turn the attention of both teacher and student toward an academic exercise instead of toward a meaningful act of communication in a social context. Like Unity-Coherence-Emphasis— or any other set of static abstractions concerning writing—they substitute mechanical for organic conceptions and therefore distort the real nature of writing.¹⁵

The weakness of the modes of discourse as a practical tool in the writing class was that they did not really help students to learn to write. When we look closely at the nature of modal distinctions, it is not hard to see why: the modes classify and emphasize the product of writing, having almost nothing to do with the purpose for which the writer sat down, pen in hand. Modal distinctions are divorced from the composition process. As James Kinneavy puts it,

. . . a stress on modes of discourse rather than aims of discourse is a stress on "what" is being talked about rather than on "why" a thing is talked about. This is actually a substitution of means for ends. Actually, something is narrated for reason. Narration, as such, is not a purpose. Consequently, the "modes" period in history have never lasted very long.¹⁶

In our time, the modes are little more than unofficial descriptive myth, replaced in theory by empirically-derived classifications of discourse and in practice by the "methods of exposition" and other non-modal classes. The important theoretical classification schemas of today are those of James Moffett, whose Spectrum of Discourse consists of

Recording, Reporting, Generalizing, and Theorizing; of James Kinneavy, who divides discourse into Reference, Scientific, Persuasive, Literary, and Expressive types; and of James Britton, with its triad of Poetic, Expressive, and Transactional discourse. All of these classification schemes have one thing in common: they are based on the writer's purposes, the ends of his or her process of composing, rather than merely being classifications of written discourse.

In current textbooks, too, the modes are largely displaced by more process-oriented considerations or by heuristic theses that see classification of discourse as unimportant. The most popular discourse classification still found in textbooks is Fulton's "methods of exposition," updated and augmented, or course. Doubtless the most complete system using the methods of exposition is Frank D'Angelo's "discourse paradigms" system. Though D'Angelo provides a defensio for the paradigms as theoretically real in his A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric, when they come to be listed in his textbook--Analysis, Classification, Comparison, Definition, Process--it is difficult to resist the temptation to trace them all the way back to Scott and Denney. D'Angelo even advises that a paradigm is "a means to an end, not an end in itself," and the relationship between the modes and their stepchildren, the paradigms, can thus be seen.¹⁷ We do not yet know whether the paradigms will become as rigid, abstract, and useless as did their progenitors.

"Anytime a means is exalted to an end in history of discourse education, a similar pattern can be seen," writes Kinneavy, "The emphasis is short-lived and usually sterile." The modes of discourse controlled a good part of composition teaching during one of rhetoric's least vigorous periods, offering in their seeming completeness and plausibility a schema

of discourse that could be easily taught and learned. For years the fact that it did not help students learn to write better was not a concern, and even today the modes are accepted by some teachers despite their lack of basis in useful reality. Our discipline has been long in knuckling from its eyes the sleep of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the real lesson of the modes is that we need always to be on guard against systems that seem convenient to teachers but that ignore the way writing is actually done.

¹Albert R. Kitzhaber, Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900 (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1953) pp. 191-196.

²Samuel P. Newman, A Practical System of Rhetoric (New York: Mark H. Newman, 1827) pp. 28-29.

³Alexander Bain, English Composition and Rhetoric (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1866) p. 19.

⁴Kitzhaber, p. 191.

⁵John F. Genung, The Practical Elements of Rhetoric (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1887), Table of Contents.

⁶It is interesting to note that Wendell, who mentions the modes only in passing, is the only one of the "Big Four" who admits any indebtedness to Bain. This is especially strange when we consider that Bain's paragraph model was also used in all these texts without direct citation. For more on Bain's paragraph theory--which undoubtedly helped spread the associated doctrine of the modes--see Paul C. Rodgers, Jr., "Alexander Bain and the Rise of the Organic Paragraph," Quarterly Journal of Speech 51 (Dec. 1965), pp. 399-408.

⁷Kitzhaber, p. 204.

⁸Henry Seidel Canby, Better Writing (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1926) p. 106.

⁹Progressive Education Association, New Methods vs. Old in American Education (New York: Columbia University, 1941), pp. 4-5.

¹⁰This list compiled from John S. Naylor, Informative Writing (New York: Macmillan, 1942), Joseph M. Bachelor and Harold L. Haley, The Practice of Exposition (New York: Appleton-Century, 1947), Louise F. Rorabacher, Assignments in Exposition (New York: Harper and Bros., 1946).

¹¹Barrett Wendell, English Composition (New York: Scribners, 1891), pp. 18-19.

- ¹²Norman Foerster and J. M. Steadman, Jr., Writing and Thinking (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), p. 3.
- ¹³James M. McCrimmon, Writing With A Purpose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), pp. viii-ix.
- ¹⁴W. Ross Winterowd, Writing and Rhetoric (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1965), p. 199.
- ¹⁵Kitzhøber, pp. 220-221.
- ¹⁶James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 28-29.
- ¹⁷Frank J. D'Angelo, Process and Thought in Composition, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, 1980), p. 98.